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THOUGHTS
ON
THE IMPORTANCE
OF
RELIGION.



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THOUGHTS
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EMBARKED on the stream of time, and carried forward with uniform and irresistible force, how many thousands do we see amusing themselves in the pursuit of shadows, or gliding along in stupid unconcern, notwithstanding their surrounding companions daily disappear, and are gone, they know not whither. We also, fellow-traveller, are making rapid progress in our course, and it will surely be wise to devote a few moments to reflect upon the most important of all subjects which can possibly occupy our attention ;—the purpose of our existence, and the end of our voyage.

If we consider our animal frame, composed of parts essential to the well-being of the whole, and put together with inimitable skill, or survey the means that have been appointed to sustain this fabric, during the limited period of its existence ; if we look upon the inferior animals, or study the structure of the vegetable tribes ; if, by means of the faculties we possess, we endeavour to understand a little of the laws which appear to regulate the operations incessantly taking place in this lower world ; or if we lift our eyes to those luminous bodies scattered through the immensity of space, all proceeding harmoniously in the paths prescribed to them,—should not our souls be filled with awe and reverence ? Nothing short of infinite wisdom could have effected this : nothing short of infinite power could sustain it for a moment.

This wisdom and this power, O fellow-traveller, is God, even *thy* God. He has condescended to create thee what thou art. Kind and benevolent, as unlimited in power, he has provided for thy comfort, thy accommodation, thy pleasure, even here. He has furnished thee with suitable food, has enamelled the fields with flowers, and instructed every warbler of the grove in his peculiar song. He has endowed thee with reason, whereby thou mayest understand a little portion of his wonders; and, to crown the whole, has given thee a capacity to acquaint thyself with him, the Author of them all. Every thing proclaims that the object of the Creator is the happiness of his creatures; and if thou be not happy, the fault is in thyself. Do not suppose that thou art placed in this transitory scene, merely to eat, to drink, and to sleep, and, after a few years, to vanish away like a dream or like a vision of the night. No:—thy great Creator has called thee into existence, at that period which was consistent with his supreme will; and though thy frame shall go to decay when it may please him to call for the spirit which animates it, yet, be assured, that this spirit shall exist forever. When the present life ceases, thou must enter upon eternity, which will be either miserable beyond description, or unspeakably happy. The few and uncertain moments of thy present state, are all that are allowed thee to prepare for it. Be roused then to a just consideration of thy condition; venture not to sleep on the brink of a precipice, but apply thyself in earnest to the great work, before that awful proclamation is made,—

‘ He that is filthy, let him be filthy still ’*

The only means of becoming happy here and hereafter, is by earnestly endeavouring to know and perform the *will of God*. This we cannot do of ourselves; but he is graciously pleased to enable us, by giving to every one of his rational creatures, a portion of his good spirit,* which is secretly operating upon the soul. This it is that makes us uneasy when we do wrong, and which fills the mind with comfort and joy when we do right. Thus the Divine Being communicates with his creatures; thus he is constantly endeavouring to draw them to himself; and in proportion as they attend to these secret impulses, he manifests himself more and more clearly to them, and they become more closely united to him. In this way, the holy men† of old were inspired, and were employed as mediums to convey the most important truths to the rest of mankind. Their writings collected together are called the Holy Scriptures, and clearly point out that conduct which will be acceptable to God.‡ But above all, they inform us, that in the fulness of time, our merciful Creator§ displayed his love to his rational creatures in a more conspicuous manner than he had done in preceding dispensations, by sending among them his beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as a pattern and example to the end of time, and as the Redeemer of men. In him was seen what the world never beheld before; a person with all the feelings of human nature, and yet, without sin; by him the means of reconciliation and union with God were most clearly and affectingly displayed, and through him, those who feel the weight of their transgressions must seek for reconciliation. He is the

* Titus, ii. 11. † 2 Peter, i. 21. ‡ 2 Tim. iii. 15. § Gal. iv. 4.

mediator between sinful man and the source of purity ; and though, having accomplished his mission in the flesh, and offered up his life on the cross as a propitiation for the sins of mankind, he is no longer beheld with the outward eye ; yet, he is present in the hearts of all those who are striving to know and perform the Divine Will : he is influencing them to good thoughts and good actions, enabling them to overcome their perverse natural inclinations, and to subdue their wills ; and thus he is *purifying*, and rendering them acceptable through himself, to his Heavenly Father. ‘ Behold I stand at the door and knock—If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and sup with him, and he with me.’* And again, ‘ If a man love me, he will keep my words, and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our *abode* with him.’†—Infinite condescension ! Unutterable love ! His knocks are the monitions of his grace and good spirit in the heart ; and to attend to these and follow them, is to *open* unto him. This leads to our purification and consequent fitness for a closer communion with him. The heavenly visiter will now be no longer ‘ as a waysfaring man who tarrieth only for a night,’ but ‘ we will make our *abode* with him.’ This is the essence of true religion ; and, let our denominations in this world be what they may, if this be our happy experience, we shall belong to ‘ the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven.’‡

But this Divine Spirit, which strives with man for his good, if neglected or resisted, will be gradually withdrawn ; we may harden our hearts against it,

* Rev. iii. 20. † John xiv. 23. ‡ Heb. xii. 23.

despise its reproofs, and silence its voice *for a time*. We shall then be left to ourselves, and permitted to follow our own evil propensities ; our souls will be in a state of desilement, and alienation from the source of true happiness, and if we die in this state, dreadful indeed will be our portion. That witness for God which we have refused to hear, will then speak out in a voice not to be silenced, and from which we shall be no longer able to escape.

Now is the acceptable time ; now, while we have health and strength, let us use all diligence to acquaint ourselves with God, that we may be at peace, for though he desires the salvation* of all, *he will* be sought unto, and he has graciously promised to be found of those who seek him aright.

Our attempts will be much promoted by occasional and frequent retirement from the hurry and bustle of life, if it were only for one quarter of an hour at a time ; that we may pour out our souls unto our Heavenly Father in prayer, beseeching that he would manifest unto us *his* will, help us to subdue *our own*, and bring it into conformity with his. A diligent perusal of the Holy Scriptures is also an excellent means of strengthening our good desires, and comforting us under trial, if we entreat the Divine blessing upon it ; for this only can open our understandings to receive those eternal truths which are indeed hid from the wise and prudent of this world, but revealed to the babes in Christ.†

True prayer is by no means so difficult as some have imagined ; every secret aspiration to God, even if no words be uttered, is prayer ; and we may be in the exercise of it, even when our hands are engaged

* 1 Tim. ii. 4. † Matt. xi. 25

in our awful occupations. This is the prayer which our Lord enjoined to his disciples, that they may not enter into temptation.* Many awakened souls have suffered great loss, and made for themselves a long wilderness, by consulting with those who were as much at a loss as themselves, and going from one learned man to another to seek that *without*, which can only be found *within*. The kingdom of God, said Christ,† is *within* you, his constant reference was to *this*: his constant aim, to turn men from a dependence upon the ceremonies of religion to the essence of it. When we are so far convinced of these great truths as to give up ourselves wholly to God, and can say with sincerity, ‘Thy will, and not mine, be done;’ then we shall enjoy that heavenly communion which constitutes the happiness of the blessed above. Narrow prejudices will no longer exist, our souls will expand with love to our fellow-creatures, and we shall consider all mankind as branches of the same family, having one common Father. We shall feel a real interest in the happiness of all within our influence, and endeavour to promote it to the utmost of our power. These are the effects which would be produced by submitting to the operation of Divine Grace in the heart. ‘We shall then experimentally know that God is good.’ We shall be qualified to taste and see *how* gracious he is, by his influence upon our minds, by those virtuous thoughts which he awakens in us, by those secret comforts and refreshments which he conveys into our souls, and by those ravishing joys and inward satisfactions which are perpetually springing up and diffusing themselves

* Matt. xxvi. 41 † Luke xvii. 21

among all the thoughts of good men. He is lodged in our very essence, and is as a soul within the soul, to irradiate its understanding, rectify its will, purify its passions, and enliven all the powers of man. How happy is an intellectual being, who by prayer and meditation, by virtue and good works, opens this communication between God and his own soul! Though the whole creation frowns upon him, and all nature looks black about him, he has his light and support within him, that are able to cheer his mind and bear him up in the midst of all those horrors which encompass him. He knows that his helper is at hand, and is always nearer to him than any thing else can be which is capable of annoying or terrifying him. In the midst of calumny or contempt, he attends to that Being who whispers better things within his soul, and whom he looks upon as his defender, his glory, and the lifter up of his head. In his deepest solitude and retirement, he knows that he is in company with the greatest of Beings; and perceives within himself such real sensations of his presence, as are more delightful than any thing that can be met with in the conversation of his creatures. Even in the hour of death, he considers the pains of his dissolution to be nothing else but the breaking down of that partition, which stands betwixt his soul and the sight of that Being who is always present with him, and is about to manifest himself to him in fulness of joy.* If we duly ponder these things, fellow-traveller, and give up our hearts to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the end of our journey will be the beginning of a new existence, inconceivably glorious, and eternally happy!

* Collection of papers from the Spectator.

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